

## The 1872 origin of the 1919 incident

-A. S. Panesar

Though these two officers (*Cowan and Forsyth*) were censured (*after Kooka massacre of 1872*), their vigorous defence of their actions marked out a path that was to lead in 1919 to the infamous Amritsar massacre.

-Thomas Metcalf in 'The New Cambridge History of India. *Ideologies of the Raj*'.

**What motivated General Reginald Dyer to open fire at innocent people gathered for a peaceful meeting in Jallianwala Bagh on the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919? What assurances did he and his superior Michael O'Dwyer have that they would not be punished for the heinous crime that Reginald Dyer was about to undertake? That an all-out revolt will not take place and the pro-empire institutions will not dissociate from them? Recent historical work indicates that the twin events of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and Kooka Outbreak of 1872 had a deep influence on the psychology of many Anglo-Indians who were contemporary of Dyer. However, an observation that has hitherto escaped attention of many historians is the remarkably similar response of support that both Cowan and Dyer got from native elites, especially Sikh clergy and priesthood, in 1872 and 1919, respectively. The tragic incident of Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 thus, had its origins not only in the psychology of Anglo-Indians, but also in the 'support base' of native elites and opportunistic clergy who largely influenced the 'psychosphere' of Indian masses. Admirably, many conscious-stricken Britishers were the first whistleblowers who had strongly opposed Cowan and Dyer. In essence, a part of history of 1872 repeated itself in 1919!**

### Remembering the martyrs

Year 2019 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the unfortunate Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The historic anniversaries are a time to remember the martyrs who laid down their lives for the cause of humanity, freedom and a quest for an equal society where the poor are not oppressed. It is also a time for introspection of the past to understand where the mistakes were made, due to which few people had to rise and sacrifice themselves in order to set an example for the enormous masses to rise up in turn, for the betterment of society. The 1919 incident of Jallianwala Bagh should also be analyzed to understand the forces that influenced and motivated the oppressor and the oppressed. This may be a tribute today, to the innocent lives that were unfortunately and untimely lost a hundred years ago. It is not the story of one person killing others. As Mahatma Gandhi remarked, '*We do not want to punish Dyer. We have no desire for revenge. We want to change the system that produced Dyer*'. In 2015, Kim Wagner, Senior Lecturer in British imperial history, argued that the action of General Reginald Dyer on the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919 was not an isolated event. It had its psychology rooted deep inside the colonial mindset. Wagner proved that two important events in history,

'The Mutiny of 1857' and the 'Kooka outbreak of 1872' had direct influence on the fearful position that the British imperialists developed in their mindset. Similar 'vulnerable position of the colonial mindset' is also expressed by Mark Condons in his book 'The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India'. This article looks at the Indian factors which were in play and acting for the imperial cause. At the outset, it is being made clear that the meaning of words 'imperialists', 'colonialists', 'clergy', 'priesthood' etc. should not be taken as 'generalized' and should be referred to mean to only those to whom the discussed point is applicable.

### Objective of the discussion

Colonialism refers to the rule of an empire over its colonies, for example, British empire ruling over India. Imperialism is the 'idea of empire', a set of ideals on which basis the rule of one country is justified over the other. Ideals are often different from what comes into practice. Colonial justice was one of the strongest factors which was used to convince masses in general and intellectuals in particular, that English rule is good for India. Some Britishers sincerely believed this to be the case, as will be evident later. However, at the heart of empire, British imperialists and native rulers, exploitation in the name of opportunity was what actually mattered. In Jallianwala Bagh also, Reginald Dyer killed people in the name of 'preserving law and order' and 'saving the rest of people of Punjab'. Relationship of British empire with common man, learned class, ruling elite was different and based on its personal benefits. Other important episodes of the colonial

history in Punjab include the affectionate attitude of Lahore-based Sikh revival societies towards the British imperialism, 1897 Battle of Saragarhi, warm reception of King Edward VII in Delhi by Sikhs. However, all the above pro-empire incidents could not allay the anti-empire experience of the imperialists with the Kuka Sikhs not only in 1872, but throughout the course of their presence in India. Why were the responses to the Kuka massacre in 1872 and Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919 similar? According to a common saying, **"History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes"**. It means that although the events in different timeframes may differ in their details, the underlying motivation often remains the same. Many a times, results of happenings in the past pave way for an action in the future. This way, history also provides a lens to glance at human behaviour and social conduct of particular groups or societies.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine the 'psychological safeguard' that Dyer and O'Dwyer would have had, by virtue of which both went ahead with their infamous action on the morning of 13<sup>th</sup> April a century ago. ***What assurances did Reginald Dyer have that he would not be suspended for firing at innocent people in Jallianwala Bagh, as was Lambert Cowan in 1872? What assurances did Micheal O'Dwyer have that he would not be punished for endorsing the killings, as was Thomson Forsyth in 1872?*** Essentially, the question being considered is to find out: What was common in the aftermath of 1872 and 1919 incidents that were half-a-century different on the timeline? According to Wagner, the violence of the Amritsar Massacre might better be

understood as **the final stage of a much longer process**. What was this process that started before 1872 and continued till 1919 and in some form, even beyond? The English perspective in the form of psychology of Anglo-Indian mindset has been discussed by Wagner. ***The Indian perspective in the form of 'security blanket' provided to imperial wrongdoings by native clergy and aristocracy is discussed here.*** It is important to have a brief look at the relevant history in order to understand the 'situation on ground' and the 'apprehensions in mind' which would have motivated Dyer and O'Dwyer to the direful event.

### **Historical background**

The fundamental ideas of equality, fraternity and freedom, discussing whom the peaceful assembly at Amritsar was brutally fired upon, have been around since times immemorial. However, during the dark ages of invasion, these ideas were outrightly rejected by the ruling elites and undue excesses were committed on people. Such was the time when Guru Nanak Dev Ji re-iterated the ideals of equality and universal brotherhood to near and far places and peoples. Guru Gobind Singh Ji rallied his followers against tyranny spread by Aurangzeb. The unethical conduct of the ruling class was restricted by the ethical use of arms for the benefit of all people. After a hundred years since the proclamation of rejection of unjustified force against anyone on the eventful day of Baisakhi in 1699, a Sikh empire was established by Maharaja Ranjit Singh on secular lines in 1799. The secular empire, where every religion and faith was equally respected and the law of land guaranteed

justice for all, ran in full spring for half a century. With the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the leadership passed to inefficient rulers, who wasted away the hard-earned efforts of Maharaja, in less than a single decade. The then leadership conspired with British imperialists, with complete disregard to common population. In 1849, Punjab also became part of the British paramount.

With the arrival of East India Company, new laws were enacted. Although pretended as legislation that would preserve law and order, the new laws actually disturbed the peace and contributed to ill-feelings against the imperialists. India had to be unified in order to facilitate ease of governance, but the imperialists were clever enough not to allow the 'administrative compulsion of unification of India' to translate to 'uniform aspirations of all Indian people'. The existing, indigenous structure was destroyed. Village autonomy was sabotaged. Effectively, the imperial Government played 'Divide and Rule' policy not only with the native people, but with their socio-political, economic and religious structures as well. Cow, venerated for religious beliefs and extremely important for agriculture and economy, could no longer be protected as it was earlier. Newly implemented agriculture taxation was no longer in the form of 'a share of crop produce', rather in the form of cash. Thus, to pay the tax in cash, middlemen were required. The economy was linked internationally, but the economic despair was deep inside every home. Unrealistic assessments of agricultural taxation were made, due to which, farmers had to pay exorbitant taxes. New socio-political structure

was created, where the village headmen were appointed, other positions were created with a view to gain information on the sources and intensity of possible resistances being developed against the imperial rule in the countryside. The 'extravagant pomp and show' of the imperial British Empire was specifically designed to make the people believe that they were inferior to a dominant race.

### **Bringing luck for the empire: Clergy or Priesthood**

The dissent was growing against the unjust imperial rule. However, the empire found a lucky ally to work for them: priesthood. The clergy or priesthood had a large influence on the people not due to their character, but due to the fact that they were custodians of places of worship and faith. Many instances prove that for selfish and vested interests, they supported the imperial Government in all its wrongdoings. This, they did voraciously in 1872 and again in 1919. Constant exploitation of colonial subjects, upon which the empire and its 'ideology of expansion' could be maintained required a short section of society deeply faithful to the cause of rulers. The general administration report of 1860-61 of Punjab commented, **'The absence of a privileged class of representative men, whose welfare is identified with that of the government, makes a gulf between us and our subjects productive of mutual misunderstanding'**. As will be clear from the following passages, the one institution that the imperialists could ever trust was the priesthood which conspired with them against the very own people which it

represented. It was argued in 1850s that **'priestly classes have... every reason to bless their new masters. The Sikh holy places have been respected...(and) liberty has been extended to all religious characters, even the mendicant friars and village ascetics'**. However, Murphy pointed out in her book 'The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition' that the relationship of British imperialism with Sikh priesthood was not straightforward and proved that it was the object of British imperialists to engage the 'religious psychosphere' for supporting the twin objectives of military and economic benefits from the Punjab state of colonial empire. In the name of religious liberty, tensions were deliberately created. Dharampal's account in 'The British origin of Cow-Slaughter in India' exposes the double standards of the imperial British policy. But majority of priesthood in Punjab did not oppose the unjust imperial laws, rather strengthened the imperial rule by garnering more and more support for them. The guilty of Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Michael O'Dwyer very delightfully noted in his book 'India As I Knew It: 1885-1925, **'The Punjab Mohammedans went to fight in Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt in a spirit of loyal duty; the Sikhs for sheer love of fighting, as summed up in Skobeleff's saying: "What does it matter whom you fight against, the thing is the fight"**'. Thus, the romance with the British imperialism was not restricted to a particular section, but a general trend of the Punjabi society then.

Thus, the imperialists discovered Punjab clergy or priesthood as an instrument for indoctrination of masses. From the same

masses, came their army recruits, who in turn repressed the same masses whenever it gathered courage to rise against the colonial tyranny. John Gordon in his book 'The Sikhs', also expressed satisfaction over the subjugation of Sikh ambitions along with the interplay of their 'religious obligation' to 'British loyalty'. Gordon says, **'it was recognised to be a healthy and good thing for the Sikhs to maintain fidelity to the instincts and traditions of their religious convictions, which were not inconsistent with sincere allegiance to the British Crown; to maintain their sentiment of nationality in the form of subordinate patriotism'**. It is interesting to note the word "sincere allegiance" used by Gordon and the fact that the "imperialized" religious convictions were followed by 'subordinate patriotism'. The aim of religious allegiance was political: to prevent the real character of the empire from being exposed; to sugar-coat the exploitative nature of the empire. And the majority of priesthood in general, did this with sincerity.

By being the 'steel force' of empire, Punjab contributed much more to the persistence of imperialism, than other places who were just exploited for economic value. Punjab fulfilled the twin objectives of financial and military strength to the empire, essentially ensuring their and other country people's subjugation. Priestly classes were an important component, who for their personal benefits, bolstered the image and perception of 'empire' in the minds of their followers. So much so that, loyalty to British imperialism came to be seen as fulfilling essential religious obligations. John Gordon's account of such 'concocted' stories and ideals provide a clear

glimpse of the role that clergy or priesthood played in maintaining the *Raj*.

### **Enigma of Empire and the 1872 Kooka Outbreak:**

Satguru Ram Singh Ji infused the ideas of equality and freedom at a time when entire Punjab was entangled in the clutches of imperialism. The book '1000 years, 1000 people' describes the conditions of Punjab aptly when it remarks, **'(the people) had unquestionably accepted the British domination until (Guru Ram) Singh came along'**. The British Empire failed on the promise of justice, around which the mirage of imperial magnanimity was hyped. By gilding the 'pretext of justice' around colonial laws and policies, imperial Government rendered the development of an awakening against their rule very difficult. Exposing the enigmatic nature of empire required some serious hard-work.

The issue of cow protection was central to the policy of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. On November 11, 1893, an anonymous report was printed in Australian newspaper Geelong Advertiser under the title 'Cow Killing in India'. The report accepted explicitly that the cow-killing in India exasperates the Hindus and has been responsible for riots. The anonymous author further stated that the sentiment of Hindu for a cow is strong and real, and one of a kind that is difficult to be understood by Englishmen. The author further noted that Mohammedan governors also felt the political importance of humoring the Hindus (*by abstaining from cow slaughter*)...But under the British rule, the case was changed. The killing of cow, for whatever reasons, was

protected by the new imperial law and the police, including troops if necessary, offered protection and thus impunity for kine-killing.

It was this unjust use of the so-called law-and-order keeping forces that the Namdhari Sikhs stood against. Namdhari or Kooka Sikhs worked for maintaining the purity and sanctity of Harmandir Sahib at the time when it was being insulted. A British confidential report, from L.H. Griffin, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Panjab to E.C. Bayley, Esq., C.S.I., Secretary to the Government of India dated 9th September, 1871, now available in National Archives of India, mentioned the events preceding the assault on slaughter-house in Amritsar in the following words, **'During the months of April and May of that year considerable excitement prevailed in the city of Amritsar on the subject of the slaughter of kine. This excitement was to an extent hitherto unusual, and there is reason to believe owed its origin mainly to the exposure of beef for sale in the city, and to the fact of one Deva Singh, a Sikh, irritated by this exposure into the temple, picking up a bone and placing it in front of the Granth, the holy book of the Sikhs'**

'Exposure of beef into the (Golden) Temple' was a serious issue. The Deputy Commissioner of Amritsar held a meeting where Hindus and Muslims were called to allay the tensions in the city. There is no mention of calling Sikhs in the meeting, despite the fact that Sikh place of worship, the Golden Temple's sanctity was under danger. This induced alienation of Sikhs from their history and sentiments was a consciously deliberate policy of imperial

Government, and also one that they carried on with the help of pro-empire Sikh intelligentsia.

The issue of cow protection has been important to Punjab for its value in agriculture and veneration in religion. As mentioned earlier, in the year 1871, Amritsar town was extremely tense as there were reports that beef was being brought in town against the colonial Government's own law. Due to opening of a slaughterhouse near Clock Tower adjacent to Golden Temple, the 'beef was exposed in the temple'. In case of Malerkotla, an ox was killed in front of a Namdhari Sikh. **Even non-Namdhari Sikhs had strong sentiments for cattle. A news report in 'The Daily News' dated 4th July 1911 demonstrates this veneration. Gunga Singh, a British Indian soldier had fired in the dark towards a point where he suspected mischievous activity, due to bandits of thieves. However, upon inspection it was found that Gunga Singh had inadvertently killed a cow. While this led to a half-hearted laughter amongst others, for Gunga Singh, the world was changed! Even despite having performed all the prescribed penances for an accidental mistake, Gunga Singh died of the grief of having killed a cow. This is just one example amongst others of cow veneration among the Non-Namdhari Sikhs. But by burying the issue due to fear of imperial Government, Sikh aristocracy and priesthood only trivialized its own condition and more importantly, accepted difficult circumstances, both economic and psychological, for the common population.**

When the Namdhari Sikhs protested against the discriminatory and wrong policies of

British Government and attacked the agents who created disturbances and had the protection of colonial law, the imperial Government acted strongly. The reality of dissent with the colonial law was made evident on one hand. On the other, the treatment of Kuka Sikhs exposed the real intentions of the 'imperial mind-set'. The conduct of Cowan was cowardly throughout the episode, but when he came to know that the Namdhari Sikhs have surrendered in Rurr village, he at once rushed to Malerkotla to become a hero and set an exemplary punishment for the natives!

#### **Implications for the next century:**

Similar to the Malerkkotla incident, in Amritsar, in the name of keeping law and order, Dyer fired on innocent people and aspired to become a hero. But Cowan had been suspended in 1872. Still then, Dyer or O'Dwyer did not consider that possibility. The history that happened in the aftermath of the Kooka outbreak is what was clearly the 'support blanket' under which Dyer and O'Dwyer believed that the cold-blooded murders they had undertaken and authorized, respectively, would be shielded and forgotten away. And history is witness to the fact that they were right. Sikh clergy supported Dyer, like it did in the case of Cowan. But the times were changed. With the spread of press and of the new century consciousness, Indians did rise up against the brutality. However, the clergy also rose up with new methods to suppress the new-found consciousness, adding to the infamy that they already personified during the Kooka massacre in 1872. Thus, the misguided clergy has a lot to blame for keeping India

subjugated. It is thought-provoking to note how the events of 1872 paved way for the consequences in 1919!

Both the aristocracy and clergy could have utilized the happenings of 1872 Kooka outbreak to gain an upper hand over the imperial Government and forced them to modify their laws and policies according to the secular principles held previously in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign. This would have served the purpose of priesthood and they would have come out as a formidable entity with a say in the affairs of state, just like the Akali movement from 1920s onwards. Moreover, by supporting the popular sentiment, priesthood would have earned respect amongst the devotees. However, like the aristocracy, priesthood also flattered the imperial Government. In a letter from Government of Punjab to Home Secretary, Calcutta, the imperial administrators noted with delight, **'At a durbar held at Amritsar today to commemorate the recovery of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, all the Chiefs of the Sikhs presented a spontaneous address expressing their hostility to the Kookas and their tenets, and heartily approving the measures of repression adopted by the Government'**. This address was delivered by Sardar Dyal Singh Majithia on behalf of a deputation of Sikh nobles and priests, appointed by the city and district of Amritsar. The real position of the priesthood can be gauged from the wording of the address:

**'We the undersigned Sikh of all classes of Amritsar, beg unanimously submit that we have no connection or sympathy whatever with the Kuka sect...the Kukas do not differ**

from us in religious principles only, but they may be said to be our mortal enemies. Since by their misconduct and evil designs, they injured our honour in the estimation of the government, and well-high levelled with the dust, the services performed in 1857, through which we were regarded as well-wishers and loyal subjects by the government...And regarding the sect, as our enemies, we are thankful to the government for the measures which have been adopted whereby the desires of our hearts have been fulfilled'.

At this meeting, Mangal Singh Ramgarhia was given khilat (ceremonial robe or gift given as honour) for organising the meeting. On January 31, 1872, THE ENGLISHMAN newspaper expressed satisfaction over the events in Punjab saying, 'At the executions of the Kukas of Malerkotla an immense crowd of natives turned out to behold the terrible spectacle and we learn from native sources that it had a most impressive effect on the whole population...'.

But then came the whistleblower, newspaper THE FRIEND OF INDIA, which later was renamed THE STATESMAN, and its office stands in the center of Connaught place in New Delhi. On February 1, 1872, THE FRIEND OF INDIA newspaper, whose editor was a British named James Routledge expressed:

**'We protest, without waiting for official documents, against the wholesale Military Execution ordered by Deputy Commissioner Mr. Cowan, or carried out in his presence...We want to know, however, who authorised Mr. Cowan to shoot on the spot men already in his hands, and beyond hope of rescue. We**

**hope that public opinion in India and England will demand and enforce an answer to this question'.**

On January 29, 1872, newspaper THE HINDU PATRIOT expressed surprise over the response of society to the terrible Kooka massacre, and said:

**'Strange to say not a voice has been raised or a line written, as far as we have seen, against this whole-sale military execution'.**

But this was not strange for the Punjab priesthood. When the details finally arrived, the FRIEND OF INDIA newspaper wrote on February 8, 1872:

**'Every fact that we have seen on the subject deepens our scorn and horror of the terrible deed. Do you call that government? - to leave vast bodies of men untaught, unguided, to grope their way into whatever fanaticism offers, and then shoot them down from the canon's mouth making a shambles of the place where the execution takes place, on the first blush of anything at all resembling rebellion?'**

The above was written by a British editor, for whom AMRITA BAZAR PATRIKA newspaper said in October 31, 1872 that 'Routledge never advocated the cause of the natives, but he advocated the cause of truth and justice...'. The priesthood's job was to spread the message of truth, equality, justice and benevolence for all life as taught by Guru Nanak Dev Ji and Guru Gobind Singh Ji. But all that the assembled clergy had to say in March, 1872 regarding the execution of Namdhari Sikhs without a judicial trial was that **'the desires of our hearts have been**



**fulfilled'. It may be again re-informed that the Namdhari Sikhs had risen against the injustice being done with the sanctity of Golden Temple that was central to all Sikhs and the issue of kine-killing that was central to common masses.**

THE FRIEND OF INDIA again stated:

**'What cause was there, what justification was there, for an officer acting in such a case as this on his own responsibility? Does any one imagine that Parliament would ever intend to authorise a Deputy Commissioner to use such an awful power as was used by Mr. Cowan? We are quite satisfied that there would be no such intention'.**

Speaking on the gravity of matter, the newspaper wondered what would have been the response of British press, had such an execution been done by Russians:

**It may be said-it has been said-that the sternness and severity of the punishment quelled the rebellion. But if so, still we deny the right to inflict the punishment on which it had been inflicted by Russia and Englishmen had known of it, would have been made to ring through the world.**

Expressing total disapproval of Cowan, the newspaper remained steadfast to obtain justice and variously expressed:

**'There are exceedingly able men among the civil officer of India, but in such a large body there must be some who are not only not able, but who would be altogether incompetent to decide, with judgement and justice, in such a tremendous matter'.**

**'We would be among the first to defend a proper use of responsibility, but- Good Heavens! - are we, because an officer is placed in a position of responsibility, to defend him whatever he does? That is what the reasoning comes to, and that is what must be stopped'.**

The newspaper openly described the incident as one of the most brutal in history of British India:

**'We hold that it was an error in policy, that it was not government, but misgovernment, that it was not strength, but weakness, not nerve, but the want of nerve, and that it may yet turn out one of the most fatal acts of our history in India'.**

The newspaper expressed that no argument could justify the heinous act of Cowan:

**'We do not know Mr. Cowan nor anything about him beyond this one act, but the act we do know and it is one that a child may understand and that all reasoning in the world will not make into anything other than it is'.**

**'We believe that our readers have now before them in the narrative that we reprint, about as favourable an account as can be made in the defence of Mr. Cowan's course of action, and we can only say that to our view it is no defence at all'.**

Commenting on the character of Cowan, the newspaper said:

**'We suppose that we shall be by any amount of nonsense about the necessity of not fastening the hands of our officers entrusted**

**with perilous duties, were want of nerve might endanger the empire. But we hold that it is want of nerve that leads to executions of this kind. The man of nerve prepares to face a danger rather than recklessly throw away one life. The man whose nerve is deficient is the man always ready jut to strike a fallen foe on the least suspicion of danger'.**

Mentioning their horror over the condition of those families whose relatives were murdered in cold-blood by Cowan, the newspaper observed:

**'We are aware that a great many people look upon the lives of men like these as of no account, but if we take that ground we shall sooner or later have to pay for it a bitter penalty'.**

But unfortunately the Sikh priesthood did not either make the above-mentioned observations nor did it or the aristocracy try to obtain a better position for them in the prevailing circumstances. This is primarily because they were not concerned for people or their sentiments or progress, they were concerned only for themselves. The imperial administration was successful in bribing them to the effect observed in General Report on administration in Punjab: 'the priestly classes have every reason to bless their new masters'. The 'every reason' must have included the grant of *jagirs* and other privileges by the imperial Government, which was of utmost importance for the few self-centered people. How all this led to 'imperial confidence' in Jallianwala Bagh will be considered in next article.